

Phenomenal Woman - Sandie Okoro

When Maya Angelou Wrote “Phenomenal Woman,” She Had Sandie in Mind

“What is the point of an important job if you don’t do important work....”

- Sandie Okoro

On April 18, Sandie Okoro, the General Counsel and Senior Vice President of the World Bank will engage in a fireside chat at Harvard Law School with Professor David Wilkins, Lester Kissel Professor of Law, Vice Dean for Global Initiatives on the Legal Profession, and Faculty Director of the Center on the Legal Profession and the Center for Lawyers and the Professional Services Industry at Harvard Law School.

To mark Women’s History Month and International Women’s Day, March 8, Rangita de Silva de Alwis, Associate Dean of International Affairs at Penn Law and Nonresident Fellow at the Center on the Legal Profession, Harvard Law School talks to Sandie Okoro about leadership values, inclusion, and mentorship.

Studies on women, peace and security show that when women are at the negotiation table, there is a greater chance that peace endures. What happens when women lead the global economy and international finance? That is the question that fascinates Sandie Okoro, the Senior Vice President of the World Bank and the first woman of color of African origin General Counsel of the World Bank. Her role is historic and Sandie knows that she carries the weight of history of the venerable development bank on her powerful shoulders. She knows that she is a symbol of change—a woman who can shape a new narrative for the world’s largest development bank and the 193 countries impacted by the development policies of the Bank. Dr. Kim Yong, the Head of the World Bank, has said publicly that, Sandie brings “new legal approaches to international finance.” Sandie is doing that, but she is also doing much more on different fronts to transform the role of General Counsel at the World Bank.

Q: When did it all start? When did you know that you were destined to do great things with your life:

A: I grew up in Balham, South London. One day, my mother had placed an old washing machine up for sale when the doorbell rang. When she opened the door, a violent intruder barged into our home. I was only three years old at that time and I called the police. When the police came to the house he told me “you are a brave little girl”. From that point, I knew I had to be brave.

“Little black girls... do not end up as judges.”

In grade school, my teacher asked the little girls and boys what they wanted to be when they grew up. When it was my turn, I said, “I want to be a judge.” My teacher said: “Sandie, little black girls from Balham do not end up as judges.” I decided then and there that I would prove her wrong.

Q: How did your multiethnic family shape you?

A: My mother was from Trinidad and my father was from Nigeria. I grew up in Balham in South London. When I was asked to change my surname because it was “too ethnic”, I refused. I was told that I would never get a job in the city on account of that. At one point in time I was the only Black girl to have

enrolled in a quasi-public secondary school in Putney. Everyone wanted to be my friend because I was different and I got a firsthand training in reaching out to people who did not look like me.

Q: Why did you choose to study law?

A: I studied history at university but soon realized that real power was in law and that I needed to study law to gain access to some of the hallowed British bastions of power.

So I trained as a barrister and then as a solicitor. By age 25, I was already managing a sizable portfolio. I was the first-ever black female director of Traders. I wanted to smash taboos and I did. Before I joined the World Bank I was General Counsel of HSBC and managing more than 450 billion in asset management. I had proved to all that the little black girl from Balham could lead at the highest levels of finance.

Q: What were some challenges you faced?

A: My life changed rapidly and the axis of the world seemed to tilt when my daughter was diagnosed with autism, at the same time that my father was diagnosed with cancer, and at the same time that I was divorcing my husband. The thing that kept me going was when my best friend who knew of my love of fashion said to me, "I will not let you wear a strait jacket, until Prada creates one."

Q: What kept you brave?

A: The love of family and friends and finding my voice.

Q: How did that happen?

A: There was a clear turning point in my life, the moment I knew that I had a higher purpose.

One day I was invited to speak on a panel on the role of General Counsel. I was the last to speak. By the time my turn came, all ground had been covered. So, instead, I tore up my prepared remarks and instead spoke of my journey. That detour was my turning point.

From there on, I was invited to speak of my story and I never looked back. I knew that my story could be transformative and that my career was much more than the law and that I had become a lawyer to fight for the causes I cared about. I became a mentor and I reached out for the bully pulpit where I could connect with other women. A woman once came to me, "I changed my mind about suicide after I heard you speak. You transformed my life."

Q: Who were your role models and mentors?

A: My father was my biggest influence. Other male leaders like Mark Tucker, the CEO of HSBC saw a lot in me and pushed me. He was my boss, but he wanted me to achieve more than what he had achieved in public life. He used to say, "You can do more. You can do anything you want." As a mentor, he saw in me something that I did not see in myself. He literally and metaphorically got me to fly. So much so that he gave me the corporate plane to fly for my farewell party before I left for the World Bank. To this day, he does not quite know the power of his influence on me.

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Q: You are lauded as a diversity champion. Why is diversity so powerful?

A: Diversity is the momentum for change. In this day and age, you have to reflect your client base and lack of diversity does not go unnoticed. I got involved in “Legal Launch Pad” which is a program primarily targeted at ethnic minority law students and is run by the Black Lawyers Directory in the UK. I’m also seeing changes at law firms who want to open up to more diverse candidates.

At Barings’ I co-founded “See the Possibilities” mentoring program aimed at young students at further education colleges in and around the London area who were doing business studies courses. We spoke about asset management and gave them the opportunity to do a week’s work placement with us.

I was the first ambassador for the Law Society’s Diversity Access Scheme- in 2009. I recruited firms to provide work experience and internship opportunities to students who faced economic hardships. As you achieve success, it is important to let down the ladder.

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Q: What do you see as your history making role at the World Bank?

A: From policies on menstruation and hygiene management to anti- discrimination lawmaking, I, to new legal approaches to international finance, am transforming the role of GC at the World Bank! I get paid to do my job. I don’t need accolades for doing the job that I am paid to do; it is the work that I am not paid to do that matters—that is the icing on the cake.

Q: What is your advice to young women lawyers?

A: You need to do more than your job. Never forget what you were hired to do, then do more, much more. That is what matters. Use your career to change the dialogue. Use your career to transform lives.

Q: Tell us a favorite story.

A: Look at my ring! It has a diamond missing. I can replace it, but I won’t. It reminds me that life is not perfect, but is still powerful and purposeful.